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Koop advocates U.S. health insurance

By Christopher Connell
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WASHINGTON — The nation's new surgeon general says the Reagan administration may include some form of catastrophic health insurance in its health-care proposals.

Dr. C. Everett Koop said this week that both he and his boss, Richard S. Schweiker, Health and Human Services secretary, believe the government should protect families against "crippling financial circumstances" caused by illness.

Koop, in his first interview since the Senate confirmed him Monday after a long nomination battle, also said he hopes to see federal rules changed so that those with chronic health problems can get federally subsidized care at home instead of having to be hospitalized to qualify for aid.

But Koop, who was outspoken in his opposition to abortion before

joining the Reagan administration in March, added that he would like to see the government play a less-direct role as a health-care provider.

Asked if he believed the government should be paying the health bills of nearly 60 million elderly, disabled or poor Americans through Medicare and Medicaid, Koop replied: "I certainly would favor a return to medical care of that sort by the private sector if it were possible, but I don't think that complete shift is possible in the foreseeable future."

The Reagan administration may ask Congress for changes in the \$56 billion Medicare and Medicaid programs as part of the so-called health-care competition bill Schweiker's department is drafting, the secretary's aides say.

The aides have said the bill could limit the tax-free status of employees' health benefits, but also might experiment with giving Medicare benefi-

ciaries vouchers for private health insurance.

An administration source who asked not to be named yesterday said it was possible that catastrophic insurance could be required under the vouchers or under private plans once a family's medical bills exceeded some limit.

Koop, 65, said he would not want catastrophic insurance to become "the thin edge of the wedge" to move this country toward a national health service like that of Great Britain.

"But I do think there are crippling financial circumstances to certain kinds of health that no one family can pick up these days. . . . We certainly would look forward to building it into some place so that that need was met," he said, referring to the bill.

Proposals drafted by Schweiker's agency will be sent to a cabinet council and then President Reagan for approval before going to Congress.

Koop said he would not use his new position "as a pulpit for my own views about abortion."

Although Koop won international fame a pediatric surgeon at Children's Hospital in Philadelphia, the American Public Health Association lobbied against his nomination on the ground that he had no public-

health experience.

Koop said yesterday, "I truly believe the smoke screen of various reasons why I was not suitable for this job were just cover-up for the fact that I had been an outspoken foe of abortion."

Abortion was barely mentioned on the Senate floor before the 68-24 vote that confirmed Koop. But Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D., Mass.) said the surgeon was being "insensitive" to women and "out of touch" with their role in the work place.

Koop said, "That's absolutely untrue. I look upon myself as a champion of women. I have trained more female pediatric surgeons than anyone else in this country."

He said the contention stemmed from a 1979 commencement address he gave "to a group of young ladies graduating from a finishing school," in which he told them it was all right "to be a wife and mother. They did not have to conform to a career if that gave them pleasure."

As surgeon general, Koop heads the 7,000-member U.S. Public Health Service corps that is dispatched to emergencies like the Mount St. Helens eruption and the Three Mile Island nuclear accident. He is not in charge of the National Institutes of Health, the Food and Drug Administration or other arms of the Public Health Service.